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The Aporia of the Other in Curriculum Construction: A Response to Anna Strhan

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Strhan examines two models of religious education that have been most prominent recently in Britain. She attempts to show some limitations in these two models and to investigate the possibility of an alternative approach to religious education. Strhan has pointed out very important issues not only related to religious education, but also to secular education, in the degree to which the problem of 'the Other' is to be taken into consideration in the whole field of education. Indeed, as she pointed out, it is inadequate for religious education to address religious issues merely as a matter of knowledge, as long as it is connected closely with the problem of the Other, i.e., the opacity and the otherness of religious traditions. Nevertheless, I have some questions on two different levels: how is it possible to plan engagements with those of different religious traditions as a valuable opportunity without spoiling the opacity and illeity of the Other, and how would it be possible for Strhan to convince her colleagues to follow her suggestions about religious education?

SUMMARY OF STRHAN'S PRESENTATION

Anna Strhan examines two models of religious education that have been most prominent recently in Britain: the phenomenological model and the critical realist model, the latter of which she describes as particularly popular in Britain today. She attempts to show some limitations in these two models and to investigate the possibility of an alternative approach to religious education, referring to the way that religion is theorised in the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Slavoj Žižek. She identifies the aims of religious education that have been set by these two models as especially problematic. On the one hand, the aims of religious education in the phenomenological model are represented by such concepts as 'tolerance of difference' and 'empathy in interfaith dialogue' that have been demanded through diversification of religion in modern society. On the other hand, the critical realist model of religious education emphasizes the importance of students' ability to evaluate for themselves 'what constitutes ultimate truth' through rational arguments in religious and ethical fields. Each model is similarly motivated by 'a desire to avoid the religious indoctrination of students', as had been the case with the subtle indoctrination of Christianity in prior models of religious education (Strhan, 2010).

Although the concepts of religious education in these two models differ greatly, Strhan draws attention to ideas shared between them that demonstrate the limitations of present forms of religious education in Britain. Although she accepts that tolerance and empathy are ‘desirable aims for religious education’ and that evaluation of the truth claims of the different religions is ‘useful’, she sees both models of religious education as taking ‘transparency of religion’ for granted in a problematic way, ‘either in terms of religious belief or in terms of [religious] lifeworlds’. The phenomenological model of religious education tends to encourage students, through the concept of ‘empathetic experience’, to understand different religious traditions by bringing their ‘otherness’ within the spheres of their own understanding. The critical realist model, on the other hand, is designed to enable students to see ‘religious and ethical truths as matters open to straightforward evaluation and justification’. The problem she highlights is that current religious education tends to assess students solely in terms of their ability to ‘select and demonstrate clearly (their) knowledge and understanding’ and to ‘evaluate and justify a perspective’. Thus, ‘the true complexity of the nature of religious belief and practice’, which is founded on what is beyond articulation and rational justification, is largely ignored.

Against this tendency in recent religious education, Strhan suggests an alternative approach to religious education based on the writings of Levinas and Žižek. She asserts that religion is ‘founded on an ethical sensibility that is irreducible to knowledge’. According to her interpretation, ‘religion ultimately, for Levinas, is to respond to the need of my neighbour who approaches me, yet remains ultimately unknowable in illeity’. Illeity is, as Strhan explains, ‘the refusal of reciprocity and totalization’. It means that ‘slipping into a relation of equality is impossible’. She describes that in this sense, the notion of religion in Levinas ‘is ethical at its core and as such cannot be reduced to knowledge’. She continues, explaining that Žižek also emphasizes that religious belief is ‘an ethics that cannot be reduced to or justified in terms of knowledge’. If these contentions are right, the prominent models of religious education, as represented by such concepts as ‘tolerance,’ ‘empathy,’ ‘evaluation,’ ‘justification,’ ‘transparency,’ and ‘knowledge,’ must be improved at least to some extent. The importance, however, of knowledge related to the study of different religions should not be disregarded, or even decreased.

Finally, Strhan concludes her paper by questioning what religious education today should be. Strhan repeats her emphasis on ‘the opacity’ and ‘the otherness’ of religion itself, referring to the complexity of the nature of the religious belief and tradition. She argues that religious education cannot be reduced either to teaching students the importance of tolerance of differences and empathetic understanding of different religious traditions, or to encouraging students to criticize and evaluate the truth claims of different religious traditions. Strhan cites the recent OFSTED report on religious education in Britain, which indicates the importance of ‘creating opportunities for children and young people to meet those with different viewpoints’, and suggests that religious education ‘should engage pupils’ feelings and emotions, as well as their intellect’. Strhan says that an ‘understanding of religion as founded on an ethical sensibility that is irreducible to knowledge . . . provides a conceptual framework to support the recommendations of the OFSTED report’. At this point, we can glimpse what the improved model of religious education proposed by Strhan might involve.

A brief example that demonstrates aspects of Strhan’s own practice in her school presents a

more concrete picture of what she regards as a desirable model of religious education. She and her students invited ‘a number of girls from Muslim school in East London to spend the day with students at her school studying Religious Studies’. This invitation program had clear aims: Strhan hoped that her students and guests would use the opportunity to ‘compare their experiences of studying religion’ and ‘discuss the different ways in which religion impacts on their own experiences of being teenagers in London’. She finds that this program provided ‘a valuable opportunity to meet and engage with those from a very different background’, and especially for her students who are from secular households, ‘an invaluable insight into what it might be like to live as a teenager whose religious identity is very important to them’. Strhan suggests that ‘the true complexity of the social reality of religion is something that must be prioritized within religious education, in a way that is not supported by the current framework’. Apparently, the invitation program described above is an example of the new approach that Strhan would like to introduce into religious education in Britain, even though she does not refer to this point directly in the presentation.

QUESTIONS ON TWO DIFFERENT LEVELS

Strhan has pointed out very important issues not only related to religious education, but also to secular education, in the degree to which the problem of ‘the Other’ is to be taken into consideration in the whole field of education. A pupil can appear to her teacher as the Other who solicits a response yet refuses any empathetic and rational understanding, and vice versa. Moreover, plants, animals, landscapes, or mere inanimate objects (a wall clock, a celestial globe, blots on the ceiling) can appear to children sometimes as the Other, as represented in some great literature for children. Religious education is merely a specific field in which the problem of the Other emerges in remarkable form.

I agree with almost all the points Strhan suggests, except the evaluation of the practice in her school. Indeed, as she pointed out, it is inadequate for religious education to address religious issues merely as a matter of knowledge, as long as it is connected closely with the problem of the Other, i.e., the opacity and the otherness of religious traditions. Nevertheless, I have some questions on two different levels, particularly in reference to the last part of Strhan’s presentation.

Question on a Practical Level

The first question concerns Strhan’s practice in her school: the invitation program that is distinguished from current models of religious education, and which is represented as an example of an improved model. How is it possible to plan engagements with those of different religious traditions as a valuable opportunity without spoiling the opacity and illeity of the Other?

In the last part of her presentation, Strhan suggests, referring to the OFSTED report, that ‘students need to meet those with different viewpoints, to engage with them in a dialogue of

openness to work together for community cohesion'. According to her explanation, the invitation program in her school provided her students with 'a valuable opportunity to meet and engage with those from a very different background' and 'an invaluable insight into what it might be like to live as a teenager whose religious identity is very important to them'. Viewed superficially, the 'invaluable insight' cited by Strhan seems to resemble the 'empathetic understanding' emphasized in the phenomenological model. However, the insight provided by the invitation program must include an awareness of the opacity and the otherness of different religious traditions. Furthermore, the insight must be distinct from the emphasis on rational evaluation of religious truth claims within the critical realist model: the insight should come not only from the intellect but also from the emotions and feelings of students.

Although this invitation program appears to be opposed to the two recent models of religious education, it is not clear that this approach is completely free from the problems in current religious education that Strhan has indicated. It remains obscure what it means in religious education to be aware of the opacity and the otherness of religions. Indeed the students might have recognized that religious insights cannot be reduced to mere rational evaluation and justification of different religious traditions. However, what follows when someone has acquired recognition of the opacity of the Other remains unexplained. Strhan gives only a brief suggestion that the students need such an opportunity 'to work' together with those who are from different religious traditions 'for community cohesion'. Therefore, the suspicion remains that Strhan's practice shares some problems, at least partly, with recent models of religious education.

In the invitation program, for example, the opacity of the Other is spoiled to some degree because the engagement with those from different religious traditions is regarded as a means to work together for community cohesion. This is simply represented by the use of the words 'need' and 'to'. Moreover, as long as the engagement is considered a 'valuable opportunity' for Strhan's students, we can guess that it was assumed to be valuable for the students from the Muslim school likewise. This implies 'reciprocity' in interfaith dialogue that is refused by 'the illeity' of the Other. The concept of the reciprocity is easily connected with 'the myth of the equality of religions' that is denied in the critical realist model. With regard to these points, Strhan's practice still remains within the limits of current models of religious education. The salient difficulty here is that the opacity of different religions is fixed as 'opacity' and represented in language and knowledge just as unknowableness. There is no doubt that we know that something given is unknowable: for instance, the last number of repeating decimals, whether or not a man called Socrates truly existed in ancient Greek, or who invented the word 'unknowable' first in the history of human beings. When the opacity of religions is fixed as the opacity in knowledge, 'the illeity', which is introduced by Strhan positively, is deprived of its distance.

Consequently, my question is: How is it possible to plan opportunities for engagement with those from different religious traditions as a valuable opportunity without spoiling the opacity and illeity of the Other? Both planning and evaluation invariably foreclose the possibility of such an experience of the Other, although these concepts are always located in the centre of the curriculum construction. The experience of the Other is invaluable. The fixed standards and foundations needed for evaluation and justification are extraneous to the experience itself.

Question on a Theoretical Level

As described above, the first question is closely related to curriculum construction in schools. It can be integrated into a more extensive inquiry: how is it possible to construct a curriculum in religious education based on Strhan's suggestions? In my opinion, we can never regard the opacity of the Other in the mode of thinking that operates within curriculum construction today, in which the concepts of planning, thematizing, and evaluation are central. It is inadequate to introduce key ideas from Levinas and Žižek into the field of education because they cannot easily be accommodated within the methods of curriculum construction. We must therefore devote attention not only to what Levinas and Žižek say, but also to the mode in which they reflect and describe their thoughts, in order to reconsider the methodology of curriculum construction itself.

The second question that demands a response is, however, more straightforward: how would it be possible for Strhan to convince her colleagues to follow her suggestions about religious education? The purpose of her presentation is to 'consider how it might be possible to articulate the nature of what it is to be religious otherwise'. She has attempted to indicate that the two recent models of religious education have limits, and that another model is to be investigated based on the works of Levinas and Žižek. Nevertheless, as she herself remarks repeatedly in her presentation, religious beliefs cannot be reduced to knowledge that 'can be argued for and justified'. Strhan has pointed out the problem of the critical realist model, which regards 'religious and ethical truths as matters open to straightforward evaluation and justification'. Furthermore, she mentions that current models of religious education, 'assessing student's ability to present a reasoned and justified evaluation of religion, are then missing the point'. In spite of this, if she wishes to change the curriculum of current religious education, Strhan can do nothing but argue for and justify her suggestions because current religious education is based on the ability of rational arguments over religious truths. Those people who have received current religious education and have been good students in critical realist model can be compared with 'fundamentalists' for whom groundless decisions that cannot be based on chains of reasoning and positive knowledge are 'unthinkable'. It would appear, therefore, that Strhan can never make teachers follow her own belief about 'what it is to be religious otherwise'. Indeed my argument might seem too speculative and extreme. It is possible that she might succeed in convincing her colleagues of her suggestions. However, when she has succeeded in convincing her colleagues with mere arguments such as those introduced in her presentation today, she is likely still to be using the conceptual tools of the critical realist model.

Now we are confronted with 'the aporia of the Other': If we try to manifest and protect the dignity of the Other for curriculum construction through evaluation and justification of its opacity and illeity, we cannot avoid spoiling the dignity of the Other itself, despite and because of our positive intention itself. This paradoxical situation notwithstanding, I am not wishing to suggest that realizing the type of religious education suggested by Strhan is hopeless. The fact that she retains her own beliefs on religious issues indicates the possibility of religious education otherwise. When and why she started to believe that current religious education 'misses the point' is a subject that invites further reflection, although it remains unclear what kind of religious education she received. If she has been convinced to adopt her belief through rational

argument and justification by Levinas, Žižek, or someone else, there is no hope of going beyond the critical realist model. If not, however, the manner in which she acquired her belief is itself a hint for religious education otherwise. When and why has Strhan started to believe that ‘belief is ethical to its core’ and ‘cannot be reduced to or justified in terms of knowledge’? This stands as my final question. I wish to believe that it represents a hopeful future for religious education otherwise.

REFLECTION ON THE CONFERENCE

I appreciate the sincere response from Strhan. I have no doubt of the importance of her suggestions about religious education. I agree with Strhan that it is important for us to understand how religiosity is ‘constitutive of the values and identity’ of most religious people and that meeting and talking with those people from different religious traditions can be a good opportunity for this kind of understanding. And what I find especially vital is that Strhan directs our attention to the significance of ‘the presence of the students for each other’ and ‘their corporeal vulnerability in front of each other’ in such experiences of encountering. The presence and vulnerability of other people can prevent us from seeing them as mere resources of learning (like reference books or work books) as she says.

Moreover, the concept of vulnerability in this context certainly implies the vulnerability of the Other itself even though the word ‘corporeal’ seems to limit its meaning to physical weakness. A merely intellectual and reciprocal conversation would ruin the opacity and illeity of the Other with the naive intension to learn from and about those people from different religious traditions because the ideas of intellectuality and reciprocity are themselves strange to the Other. However the opacity and illeity of the Other can be easily ignored and spoiled when we stop thinking of and approaching to the Other. The Other is itself vulnerable in these two senses.

Therefore Strhan is right to suggest that religious education should ‘avoid the attitude of mastery’ and ‘encourage a sense of the infinitude of the subjects of study’. The attitude of mastery in nature is a kind of violence for the Other. The sense of the infinitude of the subjects of study is essential to religious education. But the sense of infinitude can influence students at least in two different ways. Some students are likely to stop thinking of the Other when they have acquired the sense of the infinitude. ‘It is infinite!’ can be a slogan that liberates the students from the burdensome problem of the Other. The sense of infinitude is reduced to the mere concept of the infinitude in this case. This is another type of the attitude of mastery that spoils the opacity and illeity of the Other. Other students may decide to start endless attempt to approach to the Other even though they sense that they can never ‘fully meet’ the subject of their study. This is the reason why I do never think that the sense of the infinitude is the final goal of religious education.

Perhaps teachers can encourage the sense of the infinitude and invite students to the endless approach to the subjects of religious education through showing their own attitude toward the infinite subjects of their study that cannot be exhausted. But they must distinguish the sense of the infinitude from the knowledge of the infinitude clearly. Planning and evaluation in the context of education tends to reduce the sense of the infinitude to the mere concept of the

infinitude. Encouraging the sense of the infinitude can easily lapse into teaching the concept of the infinitude because the latter is easier to plan and evaluate. And I am afraid that it can be also problematic to explain simply that religious education should 'encourage a sense of the infinitude of the subjects of study' as it conceptualise the sense of infinitude itself. Some students may identify acquiring the sense of infinitude with learning the concept of the sense of the infinitude. Hence, we need a method for protecting the sense of the infinitude from the strong tendency of emasculation in education described above. I hope someday I can talk over the possibility of this 'method' with Strhan.

REFERENCE

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